

Ash Wednesday is this Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Quaker don't traditionally mark Ash Wednesday or Lent

Ash Wednesday is a Christian holy day of prayer, fasting, and repentance—46 days before Easter

Ash Wednesday falls on the first day of Lent, the six weeks of penitence before Easter

One year ago, leaders of various denominations gathered in a retreat on Ash Wednesday

Rev Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners and Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry began talking in 2018

They felt there was a need for a statement calling us back to true Christianity

Curry hosted an Ash Wednesday retreat at the Episcopal Church Center in New York

Curry, Wallis and 21 other Christian leaders attended the retreat and wrote a statement

of 6 affirmations and repudiations regarding the political and cultural climate of the US

It was written and prayed over during Lent by the 23 people who call themselves elders

It was announced to some colleagues and a few publications at Easter,

A video was created—which I will show in a few moments

The statement was publicly launched at Pentecost, first in a Washington DC church service

Followed by a procession to the White House where people stood in silent vigil

The full statement and video are available at [www.reclaimingJesus.org](http://www.reclaimingJesus.org)

Now, a year later, the need persists, and this same group of people are calling us to prayer

Recognizing that the need still exists as the moral and political crisis continues to escalate

The elders are sounding a national call to prayer to prepare us for what they believe is coming

Recognizing that before any further action can be taken, we must pray!

The elders remind us that in 1863, at the height of the Civil War

—the most divided time in US history—

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national “day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer”

Today the elders believe our national crisis calls for prayer, fasting, humility, and repentance

That begins on Ash Wednesday, March 6 and continues throughout Lent

Repent means to turn around

The elders are saying it is time for us to lament, confess and turn in a Jesus direction

In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ

2 Chronicles 20:12 A great army is coming against the southern kingdom of Judah

King Jehoshaphat is afraid and decides to seek the Lord, calling together the people

*O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless*

*against this great multitude that is coming against us. **We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.**” 2 Chronicles 20:12 NRSV*

God tells them that this is not their battle to fight and they should not be afraid

The choir went in front of the army, singing praises, as the enemy ambushed each other

This same prayer is ours... We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on Jesus!

Fasting? For some this is a deeply spiritual practice, others cannot for physical reasons

And some don't find it helpful as they just get hungry

Lent traditionally talks about giving something up during Lent

But my question to you is “How will you make space for prayer between now and Easter?”

Our lives are busy and without intentional work, we will not take time to pray

I challenge us to find a way to make prayer for our country a priority

We join with the elders in this prayer...

*We pray with those who suffered during the unconscionable government shutdown and with those who face poverty and hunger every day. We pray for those who live in fear of deportation and family separation. We pray for those who face violence — especially parents who fear for their children of color — and those who endure language of racial divisiveness. We pray for the soul of the nation and the resilience of our government's processes. We pray for those who have lost hope.*

*Above all, we pray for God to take away our fear and stir within us certainty in the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord. We pray that all will come to know that Jesus is love and that this knowledge will permeate our lives. We pray that we may have wisdom to discern and speak truth, and courage to stand for it in our public squares. We pray that we may be bridges that bring God's love to our angry national discourse. We pray for pure hearts...*

*We pray and ask God to take us deeper and prepare us to give a response that comes not from the Left or the Right, but because we are, first and foremost, followers of Jesus. Lent is traditionally characterized by prayer, penitence, and almsgiving—which is defined broadly as solidarity with the most vulnerable. Prayer and fasting will help us find the spiritual vigilance and availability that are necessary for action.*

*May God bless and keep us, guide and direct us, and prepare us to reclaim Jesus.*

# Reclaiming Jesus

## A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis

**W**e are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus’ words in us. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church’s role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government’s role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior (Romans 13). When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

This letter comes from a retreat on Ash Wednesday, 2018. In this season of Lent, we feel deep lamentations for the state of our nation, and our own hearts are filled with confession for the sins we feel called to address. The true meaning of the word

repentance is to turn around. It is time to lament, confess, repent, and turn. In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian’s first loyalty, above all others. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.

The question we face is this: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What does our loyalty to Christ, as disciples, require at this moment in our history? We believe it is time to renew our theology of public discipleship and witness. Applying what “Jesus is Lord” means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches.

What we believe leads us to what we must reject. Our “Yes” is the foundation for our “No.” What we confess as our faith leads to what we confront. Therefore, we offer the following six affirmations of what we believe, and the resulting rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis.

**I. WE BELIEVE** each human being is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the Creator of all things. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God (the *imago dei*) in some of the children of God. Our participation in the global community of Christ absolutely prevents any toleration of racial bigotry. Racial justice and healing are biblical and theological issues for us, and are central to the mission of the body of Christ in the world. We give thanks for the prophetic role of the historic black churches in America when they have called for a more faithful gospel.

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We, as followers of Jesus, must clearly reject the use of racial bigotry for political gain that we have seen. In the face of such bigotry, silence is complicity. In particular, we reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Further, any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language must be named as public sin—one that goes back to the foundation of our nation and lingers on. Racial bigotry must be antithetical for those belonging to the body of Christ, because it denies the truth of the gospel we profess.

**II. WE BELIEVE** we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class (Galatians 3:28). The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world—to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ.

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harass-

ment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics, including our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance.

**III. WE BELIEVE** how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, and our treatment of people who are "oppressed," "strangers," "outsiders," or otherwise considered "marginal" is a test of our relationship to God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. If our gospel is not "good news to the poor," it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18).

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees, who are being made into cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the "strangers" among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34). We won't accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children, and we will resist repeated attempts to deny health care to those who most need it. We confess our growing national sin of putting the rich over the poor. We reject the immoral logic of cutting services and programs for the poor while cutting taxes for the rich. Budgets are

moral documents. We commit ourselves to opposing and reversing those policies and finding solutions that reflect the wisdom of people from different political parties and philosophies to seek the common good. Protecting the poor is a central commitment of Christian discipleship, to which 2,000 verses in the Bible attest.

**IV. WE BELIEVE** that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation includes speaking the Word of God into their societies and speaking the truth to power. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to shared trust in society. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32). The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ.

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Politicians, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined. The regular purveying of falsehoods and consistent lying by the nation's highest leaders can change the moral expectations within a culture, the accountability for a civil society, and even the behavior of families and children. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society. In the face of lies that bring darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light.

**V. WE BELIEVE** that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (the world) lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26). We believe our elect-

ed officials are called to public service, not public tyranny, so we must protect the limits, checks, and balances of democracy and encourage humility and civility on the part of elected officials. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not. The authority of government is instituted by God to order an unredeemed society for the sake of justice and peace, but ultimate authority belongs only to God.

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger that threatens democracy and the common good—and we will resist it. Disrespect for the rule of law, not recognizing the equal importance of our three branches

of government, and replacing civility with dehumanizing hostility toward opponents are of great concern to us. Neglecting the ethic of public service and accountability, in favor of personal recognition and gain often characterized by offensive arrogance, are not just political issues for us. They raise deeper concerns about political idolatry, accompanied by false and unconstitutional notions of authority.

**VI. WE BELIEVE** Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples (Matthew 28:18). Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. The most well-known verse in the New Testament starts with “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16). We, in turn, should love and serve the world and all its

inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic prerogatives.

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT** “America first” as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal. We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth’s resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all of God’s children. Serving our own communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places, and we need wise political leadership to deal with each of these.

**W**E ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides, as Galatians 3:28 teaches us. But our answer is to be “in Christ,” and to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable, and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Jesus summarizes the Greatest Commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:38). As to loving our neighbors, we would add “no exceptions.”

We commend this letter to pastors, local churches, and young people who are watching and waiting to see what the churches will say and do at such a time as this.

Our urgent need, in a time of moral and political crisis, is to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. It is time for a fresh confession of faith. Jesus is Lord. He is the light in our darkness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). ■

Signers: Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore, *President and CEO, Global Alliance Interfaith Network*; Rev. Dr. Peter Borgdorff, *Executive Director Emeritus, Christian Reformed Church in North America*; Dr. Amos Brown, *Chair, Social Justice Commission, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.*; Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, *Professor Emeritus, Columbia Theological Seminary*; Dr. Tony Campolo, *Co-Founder, Red Letter Christians*; Dr. Iva Carruthers, *General Secretary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference*; The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, *Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church*; Rev. Dr. James Forbes, *President and Founder, Healing the Nations Foundation and Preaching Professor at Union Theological Seminary*; Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *General Secretary Emeritus, Reformed Church in America*; Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, *Senior Pastor, Ray of Hope Christian Church, Decatur, GA*; Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm, *former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*; Rev. Dr. Joel C. Hunter, *Faith Community Organizer and Chairman, Community Resource Network*; Rev. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, *General Superintendent Emerita, The Wesleyan Church*; Bishop Vashti McKenzie, *117th Elected and Consecrated Bishop, AME Church*; Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., *Co-Convener National African American Clergy Network*; Dr. John Perkins, *Chair Emeritus and Founding Member, Christian Community Development Association*; Bishop Lawrence Reddick, *CEO, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church*; Fr. Richard Rohr, *Founder, Center for Action and Contemplation*; Dr. Ron Sider, *President Emeritus, Evangelicals for Social Action*; Rev. Jim Wallis, *President and Founder, Sojourners*; Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, *Director, NCC Truth and Racial Justice Initiative*; Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, *Co-Convener, National African American Clergy Network; President, Skinner Leadership Institute*; Bishop Will Willimon, *Bishop, The United Methodist Church, retired, Professor of the Practice of Ministry, Duke Divinity School*

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